

## Facade

The old wooden facade of StoreFront, visually plain and physically worn, housed some of the most ambitious ideas on art and architecture. One could never have guessed that something unique would happen inside such an anonymous front, yet it projected an architectural anarchy against the hyper-texturized capitalism of the last decade. The unincorporated look of StoreFront is a story of an alternative forum that resisted the ease of conventionality—the incorporated architecture. And while the practice of architecture coerced, profitably, with the neo-Disneyesque renditions of Robert Venturi's decorated *sheds*, which ranged from the glossed headquarters of post-industrial corporations to rarefied postmodern theme parks—a built collection of virtual reality in nostalgias—StoreFront, instead and impetuously, carried on a series of ideals on the future of environment.

But ever since the world-wide economic depression that coincided with the demise of a political supremacy, the world is self awakening to new ideas and individuals. Change, rather than control, rules the current social aims, and boundaries, political or aesthetic, are becoming porous each day. The fragmentation of political and economic orders reverberate all other frameworks of society and the validity of dominancy in aesthetics is being questioned. Within the condition where transition pervades all human thought, no one can afford to keep any experimental and theoretical works aside. The ideas that were previously considered as marginal can no longer remain functionally academic or theoretical. They wait for applications that could drive a new destiny.

But gallery as the central agent for experimental ideas is a privileged space. Its primary goals are to nurture and critique the evolution of aesthetics, unwilling and ill equipped to socialize their theories on environment. Equally, the facade of StoreFront, which previously sheltered a much needed discourse on alternatives, now acts as a barrier that separate a theory from practice, severing the links between the ideas and their potential sites.. A solution obvious to this dilemma is to fragment this barrier and, therefore, StoreFront began a series of built begins to projects that push out.



First was a project by James Keyden Cathcart, Frank Fantauzzi and Terrance Van Elslander (February 8 - March 14, 1992), who inserted five portable toilets through the facade. Normally used in construction sites and fair grounds, these prefabricated metal units were placed to face the street, while their body, together with the fragments of removed facade, were placed within the exhibition space. Open for public use, these commodes, or the lack of, elicits the draining of our civility within the banality of postmodern culture—the transforming of our social structure into the compost of consumption. The inability to accommodate basics of human need is no less important than the carnage of urbanity in physical violence or the usurpation of nations/state under ethnic separatism. These toilets, reducing architecture to its most fundamental device, also suggest art to embrace social and urban functionality.

But the toilets also have a message for StoreFront too. By turning a space of higher aesthetics into a service for public needs, the project usurps the exclusivity of cultural space. The role of the gallery is inverted, and the general public becomes the user/viewer while the traditional gallery visitors are given the rear ends of toilets. Public space is injected into the gallery space, while cultural space is emptied out to the street. The facade that divides high aesthetics and popular culture is cut open, conceptually measuring the environment, but without sacrificing the civility of its social realism.

Then followed the installation of "Formworks" by Mark West (September 26-October 31, 1992). A series of sacs, made of high strength industrial fabrics, were roped and attached to the exterior of facade, and then, through holes made on the facade, concrete was poured into them from inside. The key to his method is that liquid is most efficiently contained by a tension membranes, as opposed to the wooden boxes used in traditional formwork. In fabrics, the weight of concrete deflects in accordance with gravity, to naturally create the exact tensile for a highly efficient and resilient structure—very similar to Antonio Gaudi's structural work. Fabrics let gravity shape concrete, more specifically, the dead load of the material itself, and allows the liquid nature of 'wet' concrete retained in its final form. It is also worth noting that the structure in traditional rigid wooden formwork serves solely to inhibit the deflection of these forms under the hydrostatic pressure of the wet concrete, thus liquidity of concrete is forced into the planar geometry of these wooden containers. With fabric membrane being



water and air permeable, the water-cement ratio of the placed concrete is greatly reduced, thus producing a stronger member than from using wood forms—which tends to retain more water than is desirable. The fabrics also ensure a very fine finish to the concrete surface, because the small air bubbles that usually appear on the surface of a concrete structure, together with the excess mixing of water, are forced out. As a result, a very high quality finish can be achieved.

Projecting out from StoreFront into the sidewalk, these amoeba-like forms freely invited those passing to touch. Virtually sexual, they are literally antithetical to the built environment that has increasingly hardened, either by institutional reasoning or simply in the defense of one's habitat from urban violence—a phenomena of fortification taking place in contemporary ghettos, in United States, is well documented by photo-journalist Camilo Vergara. So caressing, the way that people handled them, even concrete, which gave the reality to Brutalism in architecture, reminds us of the impoverishment of tactile experience in the built environment. And with the textures, patterns and materials of city still being dictated by our visual appetite—as opposed to other human sensors—the re-emergence of tactility seems implausible until all artists and architects became blind. As a building technique that can potentially 'soften' the rigidity of constructed environment, this experiment by Mark West foresees an architecture whose geometric determinants include the forms dictated by random events, and by so called chaotic forms of geometry. This project, which brings the possibility of StoreFront working as a laboratory to facilitate a research and development of building technology, again externalizes disciplinary aesthetics into public spaces.

Following these rather spontaneous embarked projects, it became obvious for StoreFront to consciously take on something even more physical and ambitious. With this in mind, we invited Vito Acconci and Steven Holl to form an artist/architect team to redesign the entire public configuration of the space.

The project, completed in November 13, 1993, has modified Storefront's own reality of what is inside and outside; private and public. Made of oversized pivoting doors, linked by smaller openings that vertically rotate into tables and chairs, the new facade donates the interior space out into the sidewalk and, at the same time, steals the outside to inside. The long and triangular space, that earmarks Storefront, is now subdivided into five parts, each changeable to the



degrees of rotation commanded by the four large, horizontally pivoting, doors. Interspersed between these large openings are horizontally rotating segments, that become transoms, tables and chairs when opened. When fully closed, and without any window, the facade becomes quiet brutal and menacing—a fortress. When all open, it reflects the desire to free from the bounds that structure our cities hierarchically. It is about the dissolving of public and private, and their contradictions that govern our social and urban spaces. Through the simultaneous conversion of public spaces into private—and private spaces into public—their distinction, once critical for their territoriality, becomes either invisible or amorphous. In space considered as public, such as parks, corporate plazas and new riversides, surveillance and security underlay their private function. Race, age and attires lead to exclusion or inclusion. At the same time, private spaces are becoming public spectacles. Spaces of housing projects are places of underground commerce, and stray bullets turns private space into public ground, instantly, for brief moments. Talk shows, like Oprah Winfrey and Phil Donahue, channel the intimacy of private lives into public consumption and—as the violence half-tones the gloss of our cities—windows, doors, and walls become smaller and thicker, to make private spaces more defensible. The reduction of building fenestration updates Paul Virilios's interpretation of architecture as a defense, but this time, urban not military. Building material or articulation are no longer about decoration, but the materialization of our spatial violence or image posturing based language of defense. Spaces, physical or otherwise, are now both private and public; open and closed simultaneously.

The project is also about the hostile yet coalescent relation between art and architecture, whose mutuality rests on their dominance of the visualization of the world. Aided by history, one could evince that they were once indistinguishable and, therefore, the recurrence of their alloy unavoidable. Others, following the great industrialization on human labor and thought, consent to the classification in aesthetics from which, they believe, would define and even nurture the essence of any discipline. Yet, within the contemporary condition of their autonomy, the proximity of art and architecture yet endures, constantly keeping the issue of their separation and synerisis immediate; and the recent ascent of inter-disciplinary collaborative projects, combined with the greater interest from one discipline to another, continues to question the legitimacy of disciplinary distinctions. The collaboration that hopes for the merging of disciplines, can also



surface questions about their distinctions, hierarchy and territoriality. Tempered by presumptions about itself and toward other disciplines, when brought together upon a single project, conflicts in the cause of their independence. At the same time, an ideological union of the disciplines could easily erode their specificity thereby subtracting the value of collaborative works based on their differences.

Problems in collaborative projects between artists and architects should not however rule out other forms of inter-disciplinary projects. The rationale for multi-disciplinary engagements is yet fully exhausted, and the complexity of contemporary social and environmental issues are beyond the capacity of a single idea or an individual. Any significant thought on the future of a city now requires an equally complex forum, and specialized initiatives can only procure a temporary plug within today's multi-dimensional and globally extended issues. Only inter-disciplinary endeavors could compliment the culture, economy and politics of the multi-nationalized globe.

Therefore the construction of a sustainable relation between disciplines is the current challenge in the management of intellectual and environmental resources, including aesthetics. In the strictest sense, disciplinary division is categorically an infrastructural problem, and the systematic fragmentation of human knowledge reflects the shortage of broader directives to meet our fundamental needs. The solution to this dilemma may depend on constructing an ecologically modeled mix and relation of disciplines and, like a corporation comprised of many departments and interests, a system integration on its knowledge bases is the solution that can work beyond problems uncollated. Infrastructuring of different disciplines into a cohesive and effective forum simulates the integration of disparate social issues into large yet manageable social contracts, and the accumulation or application of our knowledge, in the future, may depend on what exists between the fields rather than within—like the facade of StoreFront. The fortuity of this project rest on absence of their territoriality and roles. The neutrality of its form is a reflection of a collaboration that deduced individuality, and the facade, being neither all Acconci or all Holl, neutralized their authority.



Although the result may disappoint those who look for 'who did what,' the ambiguity of their command undermines the singularity of an artist or an architect. In the end you have a facade that says "No Wall, No Barrier, No Inside, No outside, No space, No Building, No Place, No Institution, No Art, No Architecture, No Acconci, No Holl, No StoreFront." Removed are definitions that lead to boundaries, appropriately manifesting the fluidity that rules the social and urban tendencies of post-cold war. StoreFront will commission artist(s) or architect(s), sometimes together, for an experimental building project on its space.

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